Les Paul

A Conversation With The Guitar Legend

PHOTO: DAVID ALLEN

Les Paul went from being "that character with the broomstick with the pickup on it" to revolutionizing music with his inventions.

by Danny McCue

On stage Monday nights at Fat Tuesdays in lower Manhattan, Les Paul plays his guitar some, talks a little talk and, when he can exhort Lou Pollo (who, with Gary Mazzaropi, makes up the rest of the Les Paul Trio) to sing a standard, even lays back and plays an unobtrusive accompaniment. "The way I used to do with Bing," he's liable to say.

Upon joining Les there the other evening, just after he put the trio through their warm-up paces and before the first of two sets that night, Paul stood up and rested his guitar, his namesake, on his stool up on the bandstand. It took ten years for him to convince the Gibson guitar company to manufacture it; today the Gibson Les Paul model is commonly acknowledged as an industry standard. Paul's own model is deeply stained to reveal the grain of the wood and bears his signature on the neck, the way Babe Ruth's signature once adorned Louisville sluggers. All of its hardware, from bridge to pickup switches to tuning pegs is gold plated.

Les Paul was born in 1915 in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where his mother, now 101, still lives. He started playing guitar at age nine (around the same time that he built his first crystal radio set), after the interest he expressed in a guitar he saw in the Sears and Roebuck mail order catalog prompted his parents to buy him one. A short while later he built himself a harmonica rack and began to imitate the country performers he heard on WSM, a Nashville radio station.

By the time his musical career had reached the fruitful stage, Paul had become as well-known for his experiments with sound as he was for being a popular guitarist.

In 1941, Les Paul.built his prototype of the solid body electric guitar, dubbed 'The Log' because it consisted of a neck manufactured by the Epiphone Guitar Company bolted to a four by four inch piece of pine. Over the years he's continued to refine and experiment with the instrument although the original was donated to the Country Music Foundation in Nashville in 1977. He built his first home recording studio in 1949. Two years later, when he released his first 'multi-tracked' recording (a song called "Lover" backed with another multi-tracked recording called "Brazil"), he revolutionized the recording industry.

Later that same year, a car he was driving slid off an icy road in Oklahoma. His right arm and elbow were crushed in the resulting crash that could have ended his career; instead, when told by specialists that he would have limited mobility with that arm for the rest of his life, Paul told them to set it permanently in the playing position. He had a special rack built that would allow him to keep playing while he convalesced.

Upon his release from the hospital he married one Colleen Summers and promptly re-christened her Mary Ford. Together they created a string of hits, among them "How High The Moon" and "Vaya Con Dios," and starred in the **Les Paul And Mary Ford Show** on television in the 1950s. Divorced in 1964, Les Paul retired to his combination home/laboratory/recording studio in 1965. Until he began performing regularly again in the early 1980s, he was coaxed out of retirement infrequently, the sum total of his non-inventing work during this period being a cross-country tour in 1974 and two albums with fellow guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins. Their first album, **Chester And Lester**, won a Grammy in 1977.

Today Les Paul still whiles away the night time hours toiling away in his studio. And, of course, there's his gig at Fat Tuesdays. The club never opened on Monday nights until Paul took up residence, and it's not likely to close again soon, because Les Paul is booked, as both he and anyone at the club will tell you, forever.

THE MUSIC PAPER: *Before I went to see you play at Fat Tuesdays, I used to hear that your act was a little risque.*

LES PAUL: *[Laughs]* Well, it all depends on what the subject is, right? Sometimes somebody will throw something out and, why, you go with it. But generally it's not. What I try to do is bring people in so that they feel like they're in our kitchen and this is part of a rehearsal in my living room; so by the time they're down there (in Fat Tuesdays) and I'm on stage for two minutes, they feel like they're a part of it. No one thinks anything of getting in the act, which is very nice because I love to have that rapport with an audience.

TMP: *Has that been a typical thing throughout your career?*

PAUL: Yes, I've been criticized for it by people who say you should be above your audience. Y'know, I once went over to play for the King and Queen of England and they criticized me terribly — the publicity department, the management, and so on. When we got off the plane in London they said, "You're too earthy; you should rise above it and not stop to sign autographs." But I said, "That's the way we do it." I've never been out to impress anybody. That's part of the great priviledge to be able to talk to people who like you.

TMP: *You've been credited with inventing the solid body electric guitar. Just what were the limitations in guitars available in the early 1940s that led you to try your hand at instrument design?*

PAUL: Well, you have to understand that sound stems directly from vibration. Now, in a hollow body guitar, the majority of the sound is produced at the top of the guitar, so the top is vibrating and the string is vibrating and there's bound to be a disagreement. Well, I learned as a kid that only one thing should move and everything else should stand still. So I put my acoustic aside and stretched a string across a piece of railroad track — now that's solid steel — and I put a pickup, which was actually the earpiece of a telephone, under it and I immediately heard what I wanted to hear, which was a guitar string, uninterrupted, unenhanced or altered in any way by the top of the instrument doing [one] thing and the string another.

I took my experiment a step further by trying it with a piece of balsa wood and it was the worst sound I ever heard. Consequently, I knew I wanted a rigid mass and went with the solid body theory.

TMP: *It was another ten years before Gibson put the first Les Paul on the market. What took so long?*

PAUL: It took that period of time to con-

VOL. VI, NO. 11
APRIL 1989
The Musicians' Exchange
OF, BY AND FOR MUSICIANS

vince the people at Gibson that it was a practical idea. I was looked upon by Epiphone, Gibson and everybody else as the character with the broomstick with the pickup on it. Years later I was having lunch with the president of Gibson and he said, "You know, we laughed at you for ten years. Did you ever dream that now we'd be making a Gibson Les Paul guitar every three minutes and it would be one of the most coveted instruments in the whole world?" This was 10, 12 years ago and I said, "Of course." There was never a doubt in my mind. Sometimes there's a detour or a bridge washed out, which means I may have to make a few changes, but I get right back on the highway.

TMP: *Did you learn to play from books?*

PAUL: I got a book called **The E-Z Method.** It had a big E and a big Z on it and I think it was something like ten cents. It came with the guitar from Sears. It showed you where to put your fingers and I learned a little bit from the charts.

The main way that I learned was by going to the theater when Gene Autry would be there in person. I would sit in the front row with a friend of mine. I'd sit there with a pencil and a piece of paper and when he'd finger a chord, my friend would put on a light and I'd put a dot down on the paper to show where his fingers were.

TMP: *Were there other techniques that you developed to learn songs early on?*

PAUL: Well, you know, it's a very wrong statement to say that I was self-taught. You learn from somebody else. I listen to everybody, I watch everybody. If there's something on MTV and there's a kid playing the guitar, I stop and watch it. I want to see anything coming down the road. I want to know what he's doing, why he's doing it and how he's doing it. So you have to stay with it at all times.

I'm constantly learning. Here I am, going on 73, and the thing I do most is improve. Y'know, guys say, "For his age, he's playing pretty good." I'm playing better, and the way you play better is to keep learning. You get out there and you've got to keep up with what's happening. You don't necessarily have to agree with it — I don't particularly dig a million decibels of sound from an empty head. I once said something to the effect that if you can't hum it, if it's not romantic, if it doesn't have a melody, then it's not music.

TMP: *How do you feel about the recognition that you've received because of your guitars and things like your invention of multitrack recording.*

PAUL: Well I feel great because at the time that I invented echo, sound-on-sound, eight track or multitrack — all those techniques which are now considered standard techniques — they were looked upon as trickery or gimmicks by the first people who heard them. The way I looked at it was, "Geez, I'd like to do that or do this, but there's nothing out there to do it with." So I'd invent it. The only reason I made it was because it wasn't there. Edison made the lightbulb, I guess, because he got tired of the candle flickering. My reason for developing the things I've developed was just because I needed them. I just finished designing new strings that are. . .oh, just leaps and bounds ahead of the strings that are out there now, and it was just a question of my getting sick and tired of playing with bad strings. So I put everything aside and took a couple of months to make a string that was right.

The electric bass, that wasn't in existence until I brought it about, and the only reason that happened was because my bass player quit. I didn't have a bass player and Mary says, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I don't know yet, but I'll know when it's time."

TMP: *If a kid came up to you today and asked what attributes he would need to be a great guitarist, what would you tell him?*

PAUL: Well, I'd tell him, "Before you beat your head against the wall, make sure that God gave you all the necessary things." You might want 'em but you can't buy them at Sam Ash. You better have a good ear, which means perfect pitch or damn close to it. Second, you can't buy rhythm; it's a God-given talent, if you believe in God, otherwise it's just a gift. Then you better have the ability to create, because once you have the guitar and the songs that you are going to do, you've got to be able to create some things. You should have a great ability to do that.

You must have the [desire] to put the time in when another guy is having a ball with some chick or something; you've got to be very energetic and dedicated.

There's several more, but one that is very important is mixing; after you have all the techniques, you have to take all these notes and put them in the right places. Buddy Rich and I used to talk about that all the time. We knew that the most important thing is what you do with what you got.

Another great gift is the ability to recognize what the public wants. Most people get carried away with trying to impress other musicians, which I don't try to do at all; I'm not there to do that, I'm there to play what the majority of all the people came to hear. That's terribly important because if anybody says, "Look, I'm a musician, not an entertainer," he's a fool. You are entertaining, and it's terribly important that you get that message across with your hands, through your instrument. A lot of people just run off a lot of notes, but if you get a girl in the front row and when you play a song, you make her cry, you're getting to them.

Lastly, you've got to remember, you only learn if you're looking; otherwise you can be with someone for ten years and you just get dumber.

LIGHT CRAFT

PROFESSIONAL LIGHTING SYSTEMS, INC.
Complete Lighting Production Services
for Concerts, Videos, Showcases & Theatre
Professional Technicians — Top Quality Equipment
Touring Systems, Installations, House Systems
Full Sales, Rentals & Service Dept.
Custom Design & Consultation
516-752-7574